

OCEAN BOULEVARD

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OCEAN BOULEVARD

**an epic and invigorating journey all the way
...from a boy to a man**

DAVID BABOULENE

*Once a man comes to like a sea life,
He is no longer fit to live on dry land.*
Samuel Johnson (1708–1784)

Author's Mitigation

Some things in life are flexible and friendly. They realise that a brittle nature does nothing for their popularity, and so adopt an admirable willingness to change. Thus our lives are enriched as we coax these considerate allies into wonderful new forms without disturbing their fundamental chemistry.

Take, for example, *The Truth*.

Estate agents and solicitors build highly successful careers on the malleable nature of *The Truth*, and I suppose all of us must admit that at some time or another, in the collar-tugging sweat of an uncomfortable predicament, we have found *The Truth* to be so wholly unsatisfactory in one form that we have set about it with vigour and come up with a far more pleasing *Truth*; one which has proven a great deal more palatable to the authorities than the original.

So, in this context, let me answer the most common question asked of me regarding this weighty tome:

‘Did the tales in this book really happen? Is this book *The Truth*?’

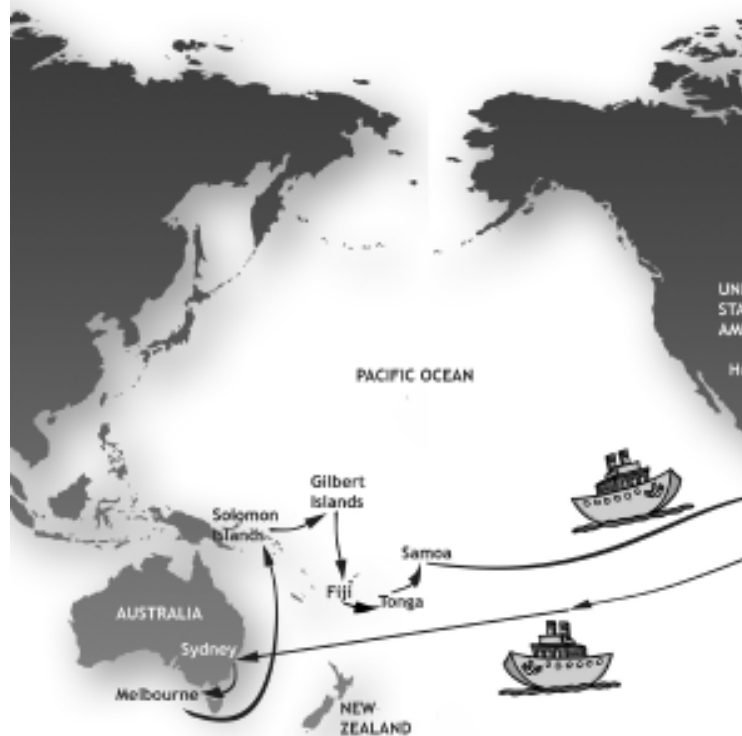
And the answer is a resounding, ‘Yes!’

This book represents a genuine journey, real people, places and events. I admit I have polished a little here, and pummelled a touch there, and drawn an attractive veil over unseemly detail where decorum requires. And just in case you are a libel lawyer (or are maybe thinking of calling one) it might also be worth noting that the events and characters in this book have been drawn from four years’ worth of shipboard life. Additionally, within all stories depicting events involving ex-colleagues, I have changed the ranks of the individuals concerned as well as their names, so you can’t get me that way either.

So liberties have been taken for the sakes of the author's marriage, vanity and bank balance, but let there be no doubt about it, this book is The Truth. As Jerome K. Jerome so (much more) succinctly put it:

'I have merely added colour, for which no extra charge is made.'

David Baboulene
Brighton, Sussex
2006





Global Wanderer – Personnel Rank Chart

Captain Benchmarkson, aka ‘The Old Man’

Navigators

Chief Officer (The Mate/First Mate) ‘Harry Tate’

Second Officer (Second Mate) ‘Cranners’

Third Officer (Third Mate) ‘The Famous Dick Wrigley’

Navigating Cadets (Apprentices)

Blom

Giewy

NotNorman

Me

Radio Officer ‘Sparky’

Engineers

Chief Engineer (The Chief) ‘Chiefy’

Second Engineer (The Second) ‘Jinx’

Third Engineer (The Third) ‘Skippy’

Fourth Engineer (The Fourth) ‘Benny the Dog’

Fifth Engineer (Fiver) ‘SmallParcel’

Sixth Engineer (Sixth) ‘Crate’

Engineering Cadet, ‘Cookie Short’

Electrician, ‘MegaWatt’

Second Electrician, ‘KiloWatt’

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Chapter 1

Mothership



A battle for supremacy. School loses out. Windy goes toe-to-toe with the Global Wanderer. Who gets the top bunk? The chief officer seems upset. Work begins. The coconuts make too much of themselves.

I WAS SWEET sixteen and my examinations were approaching like mortar-boarded vultures over the horizon. The received wisdom amongst the academic alumni up and down the country was that I was going to fail everything, and, to cap it all, Miss Fitch was clambering along behind the tennis courts, about to find us in our hiding place in the bushes. Things did not look good.

Actually, Miss Fitch looked good. Miss Fitch was a *young* teacher. She wore short skirts and her hair dropped over one eye when she turned from the blackboard. I would have done anything to please her, and I desperately hoped she might be harbouring

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a deep admiration for my revolutionary spirit; a passion that was agony for her to hold inside, but which would now reveal itself at this critical junction in my life. There were two ways she could go: she could exclaim her love for me in an emotional outpouring, we could run away together and she could take my political coup in a new and full-breasted direction; or she could act like a teacher and hand us over to the authorities. In my dreams it had somehow seemed plausible that the former might just be possible. Indeed, in my dreams, it had worked every time. Now, in the cold light of a winter's day, I got a sinking feeling that it might not be as likely as I had led myself to believe.

However, as she arrived at our hidey-hole it became evident that we would not find out her views immediately, because she was wheezing hard, having chased us a long way. I felt this was a Good Thing, as our punishment would be at least partially hampered by exhaustion. She parted the bushes and lit up the dark of our camp with her fiery eyes. I tried to look cool for my fellow political activists, a difficult trick when you are, after all, cowering in the bushes behind the school tennis courts.

'You boys – huerr, huerr – you huerr, are all – huerr, all – huerr, all – huerr!'

She gave it up, withdrew her face from our camp and flopped against the wire fence of the tennis courts to indulge in the asthmatic death rattles of an unfit person. Her whole body pumped and pulsated like a stranded heart. Beyond her, across the fields and over at the main school, two fire engines arrived. The firemen leaped out and set about rescuing the chemistry lab we student activists had liberated as a first move towards overthrowing the government.

We had been watching a black-and-white programme about student activists on television – in Paris, I think it was. Not only were they very cool – the clothes, the posing, the attitude – they were also thoroughly applauded the world over, didn't appear to have to attend lessons, and were allowed out very late indeed. So why wasn't it working for us?

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A couple of policemen were jogging our way. I gulped and looked at my fellow gang members. Paton, Greener, Wilson, Porter, Cauty (C), Cauty (J), Ludlam, Craggs and Tuckerman. Nine pairs of scared, round eyes, like baby owls in a nest. I felt reassured by the presence of Tuckerman. He took the edge off my fear. I looked around and saw others feeling calmed by the lad in the same way. In an instant our collective conscience came to a solid and unspoken agreement in those bushes: We would all blame Tuckerman.

The policemen were nearly upon us when a vision formed in the corner of my mind, and I heard the haunting tones of my Uncle Joe, reminding me of the philosophy he took into many interviews with policemen (and into each of his five marriages): ‘No Problem is so Big That it Cannot be Run Away From,’ he whispered.

I knew what I had to do. As my Freedom Party was ushered out of the bushes I stayed at the back. I dug myself into the darkest corner of those bushes, covered myself in leaves and simply did not emerge. The other lads were marched off and – miracle of miracles – I was left alone.

I knew the authorities would not be long establishing my presence at the scene of the crime, or my absence from the captured gang, so it was at that very moment, there and then, as I dug my way under the perimeter fence and legged it across the gardens behind the school, that I followed in the footsteps of thousands of desperados before me, and ran away to sea.

I didn’t stop running until I found a careers office, established the joining procedure, filled in some forms for a merchant shipping line, and begged the lady to make it all happen quickly. She found a company that was recruiting for an imminent intake, and asked me to sign here, here and here. I ticked the box marked ‘Yes please – I would like to avoid sticky interviews with policemen’ and sauntered off to find a game of football, full of the joys of that stuff that fills a man’s thingy when he’s slain the savage something-or-other.

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And a mere fortnight later – a fortnight brim-full of teachers ‘You’ve-done-what?’-ing, fathers bouncing off walls, and stricken mothers passing out clutching their bosoms – I had left school and was on a train to Tyneside for my induction course. It was as simple as that.

The induction course was something of an eye-opener, but they always over-egg that stuff about alcohol, ladies of the night, fighting in foreign ports, venereal disease, fires, narcotics, sharks and the rest of it, don’t they? I couldn’t admit it, of course, but it sounded to me like a good, long list of all the things that were missing in my life.

As the planet revolved slowly beneath the aircraft, and America manoeuvred itself into position below us, I stared down at the tiny ships and miniature towns that moved with it. I was dumbfounded. Barely a month had passed since I was a mere caterpillar of a schoolboy, living a schoolboy life with schoolboy routines. Now I was a beautiful Officer Cadet Butterfly in Her Majesty’s Merchant Navy, heading for New Orleans to join my first ship. My head swam. Planes? New Orleans? Ships? These were the trappings of an exciting, cosmopolitan lifestyle, not a schoolboy’s lot. But it was real. A new life with a big, rusty boat in all the places I used to keep a mother.

And so it was that on the 10th of August 1977, I could be found on a quayside in New Orleans, my bags dropped to the floor on either side, gorging up at the steep metal sides of the mighty vessel *Global Wanderer*. They were rusty and overworked. They certainly did not appear to be in tune with the company information I had read in open-mouthed wonder. The literature had spoken of a magnificent 12,000-ton starship, with pictures of her enhancing all the famous landmarks of the world. Under the Golden Gate Bridge, in front of the Manhattan skyline, passing in front of the Sydney Opera House, the ship schmoozing at a party with Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts. One of the pictures was an aerial shot of the *Global Wanderer*

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cutting a swathe through a turquoise sea close to a tropical island. Another depicted the scene on the bridge as masterful, square-jawed officers in smart white uniforms guided her around the world.

I *loved* the literature. It was romantic and global, adventurous and exciting. I wanted to be on that bridge and to look that important. I wanted to control a ship in turquoise waters. That would be me, setting my jaw manfully to the breeze and thinking profound thoughts about stars and navigation.

Now I had arrived, however, the real *Global Wanderer* – close up, warts and all, and with no soft focus or spectacular backdrop – was somewhat different. The romance of the literature *was* reflected by the reality, in the same sense that romance is surely present in an ageing prostitute – if the paint job is good enough and the photographs taken from far enough away.

While some of my peers on newer ships were enjoying computers, electronics and a swimming pool on the boat-deck, the *Global Wanderer* featured Morse code as its primary means of communication, and a sextant as its hi-tech positioning equipment. Satellite navigation was spoken of in suspicious whispers as a mysterious form of black magic. This was raw Merchant Navy from a bygone era. A tramp steamer, somehow still running thirty years after its sell-by date. I felt cheated. Even the Mississippi failed to be turquoise, but there was no turning back now. Like a child facing his first hypodermic, I had no escape – just a grim notion that what was to follow might involve pain.

I struggled aboard my new home, anxious to meet some reassuring signs – a friendly face to greet me; a hand with all my luggage; perhaps an offer to phone home and tell my family I had arrived safely - but my expectations were punctured on the sharpness of reality. Any people with whom I coincided looked down their noses at me as if I was a poo on the carpet, and my cabin, when I eventually slumped through the door, gave off the still, haunted aura of a room in which there had recently been a dead body.

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Suddenly I was alone. Very alone. It was the first time I had been without company for some time and I didn't like it. As I sat in the cabin I felt strange. I was thousands of miles from my life. The porthole. The bunk-bed. The desk. The wardrobe. They all seemed to belong to someone else.

'Is this all such a great idea?' I asked them. They knew, they'd seen it all before, but they were saying nothing.

I didn't have much time to contemplate my situation – or my solitude – because the significance of the bunk bed hit me at the same time as the door did – when my room-mate crashed in with his luggage. I had been led to believe that I would be sharing with one Norman Smith, so, when he arrived, I shook him politely by the hand.

'You must be Norman,' I smiled.

'And you must be Mistaken,' he said, smiling back with a certain edge. 'If you start calling me Norman, I shall set fire to you.'

'Ah. Fire, you say? Er . . . I guess that means you're not Norman?'

'Correct! And if you insist on calling me NotNorman, I will have to invent an equally excellent title for you. Judging by the smell in this room, I guess you must be Windy.'

In that short moment of misunderstanding our nicknames were set in stone for the rest of time. NotNorman became NotNorman. I became Windy.

NotNorman was an impressive presence. He was large and sported a full beard already. At seventeen, he was only a year older than me, but already had the deportment of a sea-captain. He was an accident-prone lad, with a ready smile, an eye for mischief and bags of misplaced confidence, a bit like a cross between Captain Birds-Eye and a Labrador puppy. He was from the Lake District, and had extensive sailing experience on small boats. As he seemed to have all the answers, I stuck to him. What he did not have, however, were the *right* answers, but it's surprising how far people can get in life with the wrong answers provided that they believe in them strongly enough.

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‘OK, Windy, which do you want,’ he shouted, (I don’t know *why* he shouted) ‘top or bottom bunk?’ I was about to reply in the uppermost tense when he added, ‘Because whichever you choose, you’re having the other one.’

I eyed the man narrowly. Did he think I would fall for the old double bluff? Maybe it was a treble . . . quadruple? You know the thing, ‘Now he’s thinking that I’m thinking that he’s thinking that . . .’

I was *way* ahead of him.

‘Bottom,’ I said, smiling knowingly.

‘OK,’ he said, shrugging his shoulders. ‘But don’t say I didn’t offer.’ And he clambered on to the top bunk.

‘HA! You fell for it!’ I yelled, assuming the bottom bunk with gritted teeth. I could see I was going to have to stay tough with young NotNorman if I wasn’t going to lose the upper hand in our relationship.

We had been lying on our bunks for only a matter of seconds when the cabin door crashed open again. NotNorman and I sat bolt upright in our beds (but only I banged my head).

‘RRRRright then, you SCUM!’ screamed a nine-headed whirling dervish occupying the airspace. ‘Let’s getchooo basta . . . WHAT IN THE NAME OF SWEET JESUS ARE YOU DOING IN BED? You’ve not been on board three minutes and you’re IN BED?’ The red-faced blur roared a spine-curdling laugh and from somewhere a boiler suit flew into each of our faces. ‘Get in to those boilies and out on deck NOW! And don’t let me ever – EVER – catch you in bed at any time of the day or night EVER AGAIN or your lives will NOT be worth living. I PROMISE. UNDERSTAND?’

We meekly expressed our understanding, but the door had slammed behind the hurricane long before our words reached open air.

We sat stunned for a moment as papers and dust floated down into the silence that followed the storm. We must have looked like a couple of Aborigines transplanted from the parched

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outback of central Australia, given a twenty-second icy blast at the North Pole, then put back where we came from. It all seemed so unreal. NotNorman was first to find words.

‘Did that really just happen – or have I had too many wine gums?’

I was in the middle of confirming that I had shared his hideous visitation when the door flew open once again. We both let out involuntary screams and drew the bedcovers up to our chins, but this time it was someone else. Someone already dressed in a boiler suit and working boots. Someone we recognised. This was Blom, the senior cadet, and no, I don’t know where his nickname came from. Mostly, it seemed, the rule was to call him something close to Blom, but not actually Blom, such as ‘Officer Blom’, ‘Blomstein’, ‘The Blomster’ or my personal favourite, ‘Blim-Blom’. Apparently, the word Blom becomes extremely funny if you focus on it for long enough when drunk enough, which was why his name was given extraordinary focus and concentration for at least twenty minutes every night in the bar. I had chatted with him for a while on the flight over, so I knew that this was Blom’s fourth trip, and that he was in charge of us cadets. He shook his head at our flushed features and his round Irish tones filled the room. ‘Well, come on then, girls!’ he laughed. ‘If he has to come back for you, you may not survive the experience!’

‘Who the hell WAS that?’ I asked. ‘He frightened the crap out of us!’

Blom’s chubby cheeks wobbled. ‘That,’ he said, ‘was the chief officer of this fine vessel. Also known as ‘First Mate’, also known affectionately – if men like him are ever known ‘affectionately’ – as ‘the Mate’ or for the cockneys among you, ‘Harry Tate’. Also known as ‘Your Boss’.’

‘Also known as Total Bastard,’ added NotNorman, searching through his trunk for some working boots. ‘I can see he’s gonna be a barrel of laughs.’

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‘Harry Tate is one of the busiest blokes on board, so if you get in his way, you’ll get trampled on,’ Blom continued cheerfully. ‘Rule one: do not upset him. Rule two: if you DO upset him, hide under the spare propeller on the poop deck. He is responsible for EVERYTHING: the loading, organisation and care of all cargo; ship stability; maintenance of the entire ship; the four-to-eight watch at both ends of the day; and anything else that is going spare or wrong. He has an Asian crew of around twenty-five workshy individuals to hinder his progress, and of course, he is lucky enough to be in *loco parentis* for US! We are his punch-bags!’

Blom began to leave the cabin, but threw in one last gem as NotNorman and I remained rooted to the spot. ‘And if you’re not out on deck in under ten seconds, I think you’ll be in for another fairly one-sided and motivational conversation delivered from close range at high volume, with generous helpings of saliva and a headache to follow. See you out there!’

Oh Miss Fitch, Miss Fitch. Whatever have I *done*?

Nine seconds later NotNorman and I appeared on deck. Nobody had said which deck, or where, but we were out there. OK, so we looked like Laurel and Hardy with our boots on the wrong feet and both legs down one leg-hole of our respective boiler suits, but we were *there*, ready to set about our first constructive undertaking, or ‘gutty job’, to use Blom’s technical terminology.

We followed Blom out of the accommodation and on to the foredeck. He walked purposefully, chatting about something or other as NotNorman and I leaped to avoid being clattered by pulleys and got shouted at by men working the cargo as we got in the way, banged our heads on cargo hooks and tripped over all the odd looking stuff that filled our new world. Everything we walked by instantly jumped into life and threw itself at us. Pipes, capstans, shackles, chains, cargo, machinery, hooks, tools, planks, derricks, bollardy things – it was gloriously chaotic. Hell knows what it was all for, but as a working

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environment, the place was lethal. Ropes and wires ran in all directions from the deck high into the masts and rigging above our heads, and *everything* seemed to move. It was as if a family of giant spiders had been given plenty of drugs, then set free to express themselves on deck.

As we made our way up the foredeck, various crew members stopped what they were doing to look at us. The ships were crewed by around fifty Asians working the accommodation, the engine room and the deck. Ours was a Bangladeshi crew. Blom said something confident in Hindi and they nodded back beaming white smiles, and said 'Sa'ab'. They wore ragged clothes and their boots had holes. Blom told us they stayed at sea for two years at a stretch. He then stopped to introduce us to one of them. The serang – the Asian equivalent of the bosun – was in charge of the deck crew and was a vastly experienced seaman. He had the beard and belly of a man in charge and would prove to be a very handy man to have onside through the trip. Other crewmen of status came to meet us; the chippy – or handyman – not only had great craft but also decent English, and the 'tindal' who was the man in charge of the stores. They all bowed their heads and smiled and called me 'Sa'ab'. I had already met Ahmed in the accommodation who, for a few quid a month, was to do my 'Dhobi' (laundry), wake me with tea, organise my meals and breaks when I was working and generally look after me. He was about seventy-years-old, and had called me 'Sir'. I felt embarrassed that these men – who knew more about the sea than I ever would – had to treat me with any sort of respect. Blom said I would get used to it. I wasn't so sure.

Blom introduced us to what is known as a 'deep-tank' – a special hold for carrying valuable liquids. The tank had just been emptied, having been full of coconut oil. The oil is transported and pipelined at a high temperature because it solidifies as it cools. Having discharged the oil, the heating had been turned off to allow us to enter and clean the tank. Of course, the tank was now relatively cool (although still very hot), so every inch

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of the inside of the tank was covered with a two-inch layer of sweaty coconut gunk, with the consistency of an alcoholic's stools and a smell that could drop a buffalo at 200 yards.

We lowered a light into the tank and, with our faces screwed up like a convention of bulldogs in a perfume factory, climbed in through the only access, a small manhole in the floor, sorry – 'deck'. Beneath this manhole was a ladder welded to the deep-tank side and we began our descent of twenty-five feet to the dank, eerie bottom. Apart from the stench – which made me gag – the clingy, humid atmosphere began rotting away at my bones before I'd got halfway down. By the time I had reached the bottom of the ladder I was already soaked through and highly uncomfortable. As a working environment it was impossible. Everything was slippery and every rusty nook and cranny was full of thick, unforgiving crap; the bilges, the ladder, the cross-girders, every footfall and handhold – everything was coated in an inch of this disgusting warm sludge. Blom had seen it all before.

'This,' he said, and the echo in the tank was dulled by the serrated atmosphere, 'is the worst job on earth. It is gross, unpleasant and quite staggeringly dangerous. It's hard enough just standing up, but when we are up there,' he pointed through the steamy fug to a girder running all around the tank some fifteen feet above us, 'trying to wield a hose when the ship is rolling and it's as slippery as a duck on a plate of snot, we'll be breaking every safety rule in the book and have every chance of a serious accident.' His cheerful face had become disturbingly sincere. 'Add to that our tiredness and boredom towards the end of a sixteen-hour day, and I think you can see the dangers. This job has to be finished before we refill the tanks in Houston in seven days' time.'

'Not too bad, is it?' I said, trying to strike the optimistic chord. 'There are four of us. If we get stuck in . . .'

'You don't get a choice, my son,' continued Blom, pointedly giving Optimism the red card. 'You get stuck in all right. And as

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far as “not too bad” goes, if you think seven sixteen-hour days of this crap is “not too bad”, then I dread to think what you’d consider to be a tough one. There are SIX of these tanks, Spanner-brain, and the inspectors in Houston will want to see their faces in five of ’em. One speck of dust and we’ll have to clean the bastards all over again. By the end of this week, your “not too bad” will be “I wish I was dead.” You’re going to wish you’d never been born.’

He took the words right out of my mouth.

Initially the four of us worked together to get everything set up and to run through the drill. Then Blom set us into two groups of two, working eight-on eight-off, until five of the six tanks were completely clean behind the ears, under the arms, ties straight, and ready for Grandma. As the nightmare began to unfold, my mind went back to my thoughts on the plane a few hours earlier. I *thought* we’d have a couple of days (and nights) up the road in New Orleans, especially as it was the weekend. I *thought* we’d have some time to mooch around and generally get settled into shipboard life. I *thought* the cruise round the Caribbean to Houston would be spent discussing the finer points of navigation on the bridge under a clear blue sky and over a gently undulating sea.

I thought wrong.

And as if life wasn’t grim enough, the cadet with whom I was paired for deep-tank cleaning purposes was a dead loss. I had felt that the team was shaping up nicely, and I have already introduced three-quarters of the squad. But I am sorry to say that there was a weak link. A runt in the litter. A bad egg in the nest. Because apart from NotNorman and me, with the experienced Blom as our leader, there was a fourth specimen making up the ‘A’ team.

The most striking thing that hit one upon first being confronted by Giewy was that the English language provided the perfect word to describe him, and that word was ‘gormless’. He was a walking definition of ‘gormless’ and a quite exceptional

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example of someone entirely without gorm – although, when I say he was a ‘walking’ definition, I must add that it was nothing short of a credit to his creator that a vehicle so distorted could perambulate in any distinct fashion at all; because the second thing that struck one was that he was a physical impossibility, confounding every rule of nature, balance and mechanical principle. Darwin would have chucked the towel in straight away if he had met Giewy, and I have to admit I had similar urges.

Within twenty minutes of our starting work together it became clear that he had spent his life being bitten by dogs, losing money, walking into lamp-posts and failing miserably to impress the opposite sex. Giewy was humanity’s toe stubbed endlessly on the furniture of life, and yet despite all this, he was somehow convinced (and it was this that drove people to despair) that he was God’s gift to shipping, mirrors, humanity, womankind and Great Britain.

The third thing to strike one was that, for a chap of only seventeen years, he had achieved an extraordinary degree of physical degradation. He was basically skinny, but sported a paunch that would impress the purists amongst construction workers. Above the paunch was a sunken, bony chest, and atop the alleged chest was . . . nothing. He had no shoulders, and you had to look elsewhere for his head. His neck emerged horizontally from the space between the places his shoulders weren’t and curved immediately downwards. It then took a U-bend back up before you got to the head. The tallest point on his superstructure was, therefore, his hunched lack of shoulders, giving him the overall appearance of life’s dopiest vulture. This impression was further enhanced by his big hooked nose, goofy teeth, and his vocabulary, which consisted exclusively of a single call, the depressed expletive ‘Giew!’ that indicated the delivery of the latest in a lifetime of disappointments and rejection. And this was to be my working partner. Perfect. Just perfect.

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Despite the fact that we worked eight hours on and eight off for an eternity or two, the deep-tanks stubbornly refused to get any cleaner. We hosed the bulkheads until we ached, we scrubbed at rusty metal until our fingers bled, we hauled bucket after bucket of sludge up through the manhole, and we did headstands into the bilges to clear the pumps. It was like working in a labour camp. Pretty soon my brain lost track of right and wrong, my eyes began to deceive me, and all co-ordination and strength disappeared. The days and nights melded into one coconut hallucination, and all eight hours off were taken up with sleep, sometimes without even bothering to get out of my boilie and into the shower. Personal hygiene was simply too much effort when I emerged from the deep-tank – manky, upset and too exhausted even to eat – so a clear stretch of boat-deck sufficed for those brief moments when we were not up to our necks in recalcitrant coconut muck.

I cannot possibly put into words just how distressed I was getting with the job. Apart from anything else there was the coconut. My entire life and everything in it was impregnated, flavoured, coloured and possessed by coconut. I was coated in coconut. My hair was matted in coconut. There was coconut mosh between my toes and under my arms. I became convinced that while we were out working someone was nipping in and carefully soaking our cabin carpet, our bedding and our clothes in coconut. Meals (taken, if at all, on the run in the duty engineers' mess) consisted of potato-shaped coconut, with vegetable-shaped coconut, and meat-shaped coconut, all cooked in coconut oil and covered in thick brown coconut gravy. Pudding was always a chunk of coconut (with optional coconut custard) washed down with a delicious cup of hot coconut tea. One day there was actually an item on the menu which was 'delicately augmented with desiccated coconut'. It was several weeks before the chief cook could safely show his face in public again.

As the ship steamed round towards Houston, the interminable drudgery of working until I dropped, sleeping until

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woken, then working again, continued unabated for a full week. My life consisted of nothing else.

We finished the last deep-tank two hours before our arrival in Houston. I was exhausted. No, no, don't just skip over that. Read it properly – I was EXHAUSTED. Let's have no doubt about it, we're talking shagged out here. I hadn't so much as *seen* the bridge yet, or even the officers' mess where we were supposed to eat with civility in our uniform whites. I hadn't unpacked my uniform whites yet. I had hardly seen the sun or moon. Just coconuts in the sky.

Despite my exhaustion, I was so very pleased that we had finished that I dragged my aching limbs, screaming and kicking, from the sleep they so desperately craved, into the shower and gave them as good a wash as my drained muscles could muster.

The shower did nothing to alleviate the presence of coconut. It was impossible to gauge where the layers of coconut ended and my skin began, but I did feel better for it nonetheless. It was eight o'clock in the morning, and having worked all night and most of the day before without rest, I was looking forward to the deepest, most deserved sleep any man ever had. My eyes took in the humble bunk. I felt as if I had just been given a general anaesthetic as an uncontrollable desire to sleep washed over me. The bed opened up its loving arms and gathered me in like a long-lost son. I felt the pillow close around my head. My eyes began to quiver shut and – for the first time in a week – a smile drew across my coconut lips and the mists of sleep drew irresistibly into the coconut skies of my mind.

WHUNG! The door flew open. I tried to sit bolt upright (as was becoming the accepted norm on these occasions) but I was face downwards and too tired to spin. Somewhere, my brain was telling me to be startled and alarmed – frightened, even; but I just couldn't be arsed, and just lay there hoping that if I was going to die, whoever it was would just get on with it.

'FOR'D STAND-BY, WINDY! Fifteen minutes. Let's getchoo UP THEEERRREE. . . OI! I THOUGHT I TOLD

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YOU NEVER TO GO TO BED! ARE YOU DELIBERATELY DEFYING ME? You cheeky bastard! I'll see you on the fo'c'sle in five minutes. LOOK LIVELEEEEEEY!

I dragged my sleepy head up through one hundred fathoms of sleep. What? Get up? ME? I'd only been asleep three minutes! Only the echoes of his screamed commands and the recoil of the slammed door lingered. I could have cried. There must be some mistake. I had to talk to the man. To reason with him. Even at this level of exhaustion, I could not bring myself simply to turn over and go back to sleep – he'd rip my head off – so I decided to go up to the fo'c'sle and explain things to him. Surely the man had *some* compassion? Maybe he'd got the wrong cabin; he should be *pleased* with me for the work I'd done!

I blundered around trying to get myself together. I wished my mum were there to go and talk to him for me. She'd sort him out; but she was thousands of miles away, so this was down to me. My first job as an independent grown-up. I would go and have it out with the man.

I only had one pair of boots and they were turgid with cold coconut oil. The thought of squelching into them brought my stomach rising up into my throat. I'd given up with socks days before. They'd all rotted away. I looked through the congealed pile of boilies. They were all brown and gunked up with a heady mix of sweat and coconut oil. So, although I was still glowing from the luxurious shower of all those minutes ago, I had no choice but to ease myself unhappily into a cold, clingy, coconut boilie and a clammy pair of boots without socks. I tramped miserably up the foredeck trying not to come into contact with any of my clothing, but every step sent a cold, phlegmy shiver down my spine.

I took one look at the fire in the mate's eye and, in the absence of my mother, made another grown-up decision. I decided it would be impolite for me to turn down his invitation to participate, and besides, it's not every day one arrives in Houston. The mate just didn't want me to miss it. Might as

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well enjoy it now I'm here, eh? No point in having a go at him – the mate probably had enough on his plate without me giving him a mouthful. I would give him the benefit of the doubt this time. Maybe I'd have a quiet word with him later so he didn't wake me up unnecessarily again. I sighed and took up my position high on the fo'c'sle head for the forward stand-by.

Chapter 2

Come in, Houston



Windy meets America and injures a representative. Notes on Ugly Mobs and tobacco spitting. Life under the spare propeller.

AS THE SHIP enters or leaves a port there are three stand-by positions. Down aft with the second mate or on the fo’c’sle with the mate (known respectively as the ‘after stand-by’ and ‘forward stand-by’ – both physically demanding posts) or on the bridge with the third mate, the captain and the pilot, a more cerebral and cleaner post with the added benefit of being somewhere other than where the mate is. I had pulled the short straw. In fact, not only was it the short straw, it was the shortest of all short straws. With so little sleep and so sticky a boilie, closer examination revealed my straw to be so short that it was actually taller if it was laid down than stood upright.

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So I am sorry to report that I probably did not appreciate the true wonder of arriving in Houston as much as I otherwise might. By rights I should have been at least awe-inspired and possibly even agog. In fact, I felt wretched and would gladly have skipped the whole ghastly episode in preference to an hour's kip; but as the pace picked up, the general buzz of a stand-by coupled with a few educational thoughts roared in my direction from the mate helped me to find an interest. The pilots arrived on a launch and climbed a rope ladder slung over the side of the ship, ropes and winches were prepared, tugs were connected by huge wires, and the busy life surrounding the Houston Ship Canal bustled by. The walkie-talkies crackled, the sun shone and, in spite of everything, life began to look a little brighter. At least I was doing something more interesting than cleaning deep-tanks.

Soon our berth hove into view. The mate shouted across the two yards at me.

'RRRRRIIGGHHT, BABOULENE! Get that heaving line and, when you reckon you can make the distance, sling the heavy end on to the quay for those shore-wallahs to drag our mooring ropes ashore with. And DON'T FORGET TO KEEP HOLD OF THE OTHER END!'

I picked up the coil of cord-like line. On one end was a heavy ball to allow it to be thrown a goodish distance. I looked around at the crew eyeing me suspiciously. None of them said a word, but it was clear they didn't think I should be given this responsibility. I could see binoculars trained on me from the bridge. On the quay, the wharfies were looking up expectantly for the first line to come ashore. It was up to me to make the distance. This was my moment. Anybody could clean a deep-tank, but this was a chance to make a name for myself. It was like playing for England. Here we were at our first international venue and the pressure was on me to heave that line. I stood proud and high on the fo'c'sle and the eyes of the world bore

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down their sternest test. Would I respond to the pressure or capitulate? The Hero or the Chump?

I watched and waited attentively as the ship edged closer and closer. My judgement was fine, my instinct honed... my moment arrived. I took a deep breath, wound myself up for the throw, let out an Olympic roar that made even the mate jump, and gave it everything I had. I put my heart and soul into that heave, and as I recovered and looked out at the line, the world went into slow motion. The balled end was off like a rocket, and the entire ship held its breath as the line ate up the miles, but would it make the quayside? I believed very strongly that it would. The trajectory was perfect, the delivery fine. I had responded to the pressure and pulled out a beauty. I relaxed and prepared to soak up the glory. The thought even crossed my mind that I might receive a round of applause from the crew, the bridge and the wharfies for making their jobs that much easier, and with such *style* to boot.

Suddenly there was a whipping rip in my right hand, and before I could say 'Yeee-ouch!' my glory was disappearing over the side along with the non-balled end of the heaving line.

The whole rope was now airborne.

I considered this new turn of events and a couple of indisputable facts raised their ugly heads. Not only had I failed to keep hold of the other end as bidden, but it was also becoming evident that I had been a little too vigorous with my throw. Because as the near end of the line left the fo'c'sle head and set off in hot pursuit of the balled end, the wharfies had their backs to us in order to watch the balled end heading off towards Canada. It was prevented in this aim only by the considerable presence of the shoreside bosun. He was oblivious to the approach of incoming enemy fire and was passing from left to right way over by the dockside buildings. He cut a curious figure (as do many Texans) in that, rather like my short straw, he would be taller lying down than he was standing up, this by virtue of the enormity of his stomach. I am able to make this statement

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with conviction because, after the leaden ball caught him with a sickening thud just under the right ear, he obligingly lay down, thus providing the empirical evidence required to support the theory.

Before lying down, however, he proved that he was not just a man with a stomach. He provided indications of hidden talents. Because as the balled end found its mark, he made the most of his extensive audience by spitting his chewing-tobacco a record-shattering 52 yards across the quay. I did not have time to patent the idea that a sharp and unexpected crack under the right ear is just the tonic a champion tobacco-spitter needs to break world records, because as he assumed the prostrate position with his mouth open and his tongue lolling to one side, his colleagues were turning their attention back to the ship to ascertain the identity of his assailant. Sticking together like true British Bulldogs – united by our proud history and great country – I knew I was safe amongst my compatriots and fellow crew members. As I ducked down to avoid being spotted, each of them to a man dropped what he was doing and pointed at me, crying, ‘It was him! It was him!’

Hindered in their joint ambition to interview me by the lack of gangway, a queue of America’s Most Ugly – all with large stomachs and mouths grinding angrily on tobacco – lined up along the quay and began hurling abuse. Now we Baboulenes are well prepared for these things, so I was quick with the right response. A newcomer to ugly mobs might get the idea into his head that they are content merely to line up and present their case from a respectful distance. He might stand his ground and listen with a critical ear for inconsistencies in their arguments. He would be wrong. It is my unerring experience that the verbal period of mob behaviour is merely a prelude to the main event. I would bet anybody that these stout chappies were merely filling in time with the fist waving and the choral stuff until they could more positively express themselves with blunt instruments. I made a dash for it.